

The Bite of Narcissism

Need a new villain to read -or write- about?

Narcissists are those who you love and hate. In the end, it's just hatred. When you meet him or her, all that's visible is their charm and intelligence. Then the thunderbolt hits you. Here comes the rage, the duplicitous behavior, and being thrown under the bus.

My bet is that you all have had to put up with a narcissist, and you can tap this vast experience and turn it into a memorable villain in your book or short story.

For this month's article, I've compiled a framework that can be used as the next character description for your oh-so-self-absorbed and entitled bad so and so.

Narcissists are blind in the worst way. They have no insight into the harm they cause others. So explicit is this fact, that if a narcissist were to read a story about their total self-absorption, as if a mirror was held up to him or her, their cluelessness would remain solidly intact.

Can one tell ahead of time when they're in the grips of someone with narcissistic personality before they get thrown under the bus? As the creator of your nasty character, you get to decide. How trusting is your innocent protagonist and what's at stake?

Narcissists are psychologically deaf, blind, lack the capacity of human connectedness and have zero psychological insight. This disability is sad, really, because they just don't get it, even when everyone around them does (eventually). Those with a narcissistic personality disorder limp through life talking about their own litany of successes only as they see them. They are charming one minute and extracting psychological blood from their loved ones the next. All of this is executed without insight or empathy.

What about the rest of us? Their victims? Well, at best they remain resilient. Even when the blood continues to drip, drip, drip, from them, without actually dying. It doesn't matter who the narcissist is. It could be a partner, a parent, a sibling, an in-law, friend, or a boss. All of the victims hurt. And there are many. Just look around. If, as a writer, you could even decide to do a survey with everyone who's suffered at the hands of a narcissist. The stories you'll hear would make a book in and of itself.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual published by the American Psychological Association, below is the official general diagnostic criteria of all personality disorders:

- A. An enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture. This pattern is manifested in two (or more) of the following areas:
 - a. Cognition (i.e., ways of perceiving and interpreting self, other people, and events)
 - b. Affectivity (i.e., the range, intensity, lability, and appropriateness of emotional response)
 - c. Interpersonal functioning
 - d. Impulse control
- B. The enduring pattern is inflexible and pervasive across a broad range of personal and social situations.
- C. The enduring pattern leads to clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. The pattern is stable and of long duration, and its onset can be traced back to at adolescence or early adulthood.
- E. The enduring pattern is not better accounted for as a manifestation or consequence of another mental disorder.

- F. The enduring pattern is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (a drug of abuse or medication) or a general medical condition (e.g. head trauma).

Specifically here is the official description of a NARCISSITIC PERSONALITY DISORDER:

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements);
2. Is pre-occupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is 'special' and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people;
4. Requires excessive admiration
5. Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations.
6. Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends;
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others;
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her;
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

The narcissistic character traits are a treasure trove of fodder for any writer. There are many real-life people who fit this description. Bernie Madoff, it has been said, was very narcissistic. Other labels have also been used to describe him that are much worse.

Frank Underwood, the protagonist in the series, House of Cards, was also viewed as a narcissist. This is due to his inability to empathize with others and his preoccupation with gaining power and achieving success at any cost. His actions are often selfish and manipulative, furthering his own agenda without considering the consequences for those around him. He also displays an excessive need for admiration from those he perceives as being inferior to him, which is typical of narcissistic behavior.

Underwood's grandiose attitude and complete lack of remorse demonstrate how unchecked narcissism can lead to dangerous behaviors. Whilst his ambition and determination may be admirable in some respects, it is clear that this character has a serious problem.

People with narcissistic personality disorders share similar traits with addicts.

Those around him have a great deal of difficulty trying to beat a narcissist at their own game. Best advice? Don't try. In real life, it would be easier on your heart and your soul to simply walk away.

If you're writing a novel, however, you can create many twists and turns in your book as you construct numerous scenarios and antics that the well-meaning other characters in your novel have to overcome.

Narcissists come in a variety of shades, traits and along the severity continuum. Here's a few ideas to help you create your villainous character:

- S/he is a hog for attention and adoration. This manifests itself by being overly boastful or charming or self-effacing. This individual may not even be aware of their deep feelings of invalidity and undesirability. Their tactics are driven to impress others, but this is only a temporary fix to their shame. S/he desires applause.

- The Bully mistrusts everyone. He does not want to be controlled and will make damn sure no one take advantage of him. He protects himself by being critical of everyone. And in order to achieve his ends, he's honed a talent in making others feel powerless or even stupid.
- Of course, a hallmark of narcissism, is a sense of entitlement. This behavior portrays itself in someone who thinks s/he can make up her own set of rules. S/he has convinced him or herself that they are superior, deserves to be treated differently, and should be able to have whatever s/he wants whenever s/he wants it. Obnoxious and tiring, right? They hide behind such catch phrases as "I just tell it like it is," (this is just a veil to hide behind being mean), or arrogance, manifesting itself in chronic lateness for social get togethers. In addition, this person can also show any different number of histrionic episodes. Being the accompanying friend having to witness this endless litany of showmanship is nothing short of embarrassing.
- Let's not forget the possibility of the narcissistic addict. This is rife with material for any author. Pick any addiction that makes your story interesting: Gambling, Oxycodone, alcohol, sex, porn, infidelity, spending or workaholism.

If your protagonist, the good person, has to drudge through the emotional pain inflicted on him or her, then this is also a great story and emotional arc that ends with your protagonist claiming victory. Great stuff, yes?

So, what tools might your protagonist learn in order to dis-arm this mean creature while also making your storyline plausible? Your protagonist is a blank canvas upon which to write his or her character, the involvement with Mr. or Miss nasty, and how self-awareness was the beginning of dis-entangling from the narcissist's horrible, ego-destructing gaslighting manipulations.

Here's a few possibilities to consider about how your protagonist terminates his or her pattern of suffering. I'm sure your creative brain will come up with many more:

The recipient of the ongoing acerbic behavior of the narcissist MUST experience a fundamental shift. That's right, a firm (and new) perspective. When this happens, she will feel it. "Change your behavior, or I'm leaving," is one example of the recipient's new mantra. Fear of abandonment or shame no longer has its grips on her. Clarity and elevated self-esteem accompany the person who's tolerated the tiresome barking of their self-absorbed loved one.

A variety of possibilities exist for the writer to 'show' how the protagonist gains her (his) strength:

- She views the narcissist as interesting, but imperfect;
- She approaches this individual with a planful, chin-up, strong backbone, focused demeanor of confidence;
- She finds strength in the freedom she will experience as she asserts herself with the narcissist;
- With a new grasp of who your protagonist is dealing with, she can choose to completely ignore the relentless 'baiting' that the self-absorbed will relentlessly involve themselves in. Instead, all that's going to be provided to the self-absorbed is modest recognition. The focus is on thoughtful unadorned kindness instead of the dramatic over-the-top praise that is being sought.
- When your protagonist finds herself in the company of a big bully, she knows to put her 'assertiveness' cap on. This comes through practice, and she has her bullet proof vest on. She's ready this time. She's able to inform him with direct eye contact, "Your tone and behavior is unacceptable. Furthermore, it isn't helpful. You cannot curse me, and I demand to be treated respectfully."
- On the topic of respect, your protagonist's emotional arch should include learning self-care. This is especially true if in the grips of an addict. You may place your protagonist in a support group, talking to friends, putting together an intervention, attending an al-anon group, and demanding that the narcissist seek professional help. When he's at the ready with his tired promises to 'quit

tomorrow', your protagonist hands him the phone and demands he contact the professional agency NOW.

- If you really want to layer additional conflict to your storyline, put your protagonist in a relationship with Mr. Nasty who simply isn't worth fighting for. He is perilous, and escaping from his clutches is the only solution. This villain is a threat to everyone's security, safety and stability. He is aggressive, has no clue about remorse, and shows no sign of having a moral compass. Examples of this abound. Perhaps this bad guy has made direct threats to your protagonist or her family. Perhaps he has begun to stalk her. Remember to put your protagonist through conflicts, while the narcissist demonstrates a complete disregard and even contempt for others or for any human intrinsic experiences. When he looks inward in that rare moment, there's nothing there!—he/she is sees only a hole.

That's it for this month's ideas. I enjoyed writing this article and I surely hope it can provide the writer in you with some delicious plot lines.